XIII
TEN BASES OF MERITORIOUS ACTION

PART TWO: THE *SILA* GROUP

CONTENTS

1. Definition of Morality (*Sila*)

Morality or *Sila* is the **foundation of all meritorious actions** without which there can be no act of merit. This is because volitions without morality lack the wholesome mental factors of non-greed, non-hate and non-delusion, the root causes of merit. Even in the act of giving, if both donor and recipient are immoral, the resultant effect will be poor and lacking. Morality is defined as the following:

(a) Morality of Volition, Abstention and Performance

According to the Noble Eightfold Path, the 3 path factors constituting morality are:

- **Right Action**, which is abstention from the wrong actions of killing living beings, stealing and sexual misconduct.

- **Right Speech**, which is abstention from the wrong speech of lying, slander, abusive words and frivolous talk.

- **Right Livelihood**, which is abstention from the wrong livelihood of trading in weapons, living beings, flesh, intoxicants, poisons, as well as any livelihood involving wrong actions and wrong speech.

The three mental factors of Right Action, Right Speech and Right Livelihood are known as the **Morality of Abstention**. The volitions that accompany them are known as **Morality of Volition**. The volition that causes one to fulfill duties towards one's elders or teachers such as Reverence and Service is known as Morality of Performance.

(b) Morality of Non-Greed, Non-Hate, Non-Delusion

- Greed prompts one to covet other's property giving rise to the wrong thought of **covetousness**. When one dispels such thought

with right effort, there arise in one the **dispelling volition** and **non-greed**. These mental factors are called Morality.

- Hate prompts one to wish to harm others giving rise to the wrong thought of **ill-will.** When one dispels such thought with right effort, there arise in one the **dispelling volition** and **non-hate**. These mental factors are called Morality.

- Delusion prompts one to believe in a permanent soul or disbelieve in the Law of *Kamma* giving rise to the wrong thought or **wrong view.** When one dispels such beliefs, there arise in one the **dispelling volition** and **non-delusion or right view.** These mental factors are called Morality.

The kinds of Morality described in (a) and (b) apply equally to monks and lay disciples. In addition, monks have to observe **Morality of Restraint** in order to prevent the arising of defilements and avoid the transgression of precepts.

(c) Morality of Restraint (Applicable to Monks Only)

There are 5 types of restraint observed by monks, namely:

i) Restraint through the ***Patimokkha*** or the **227 Fundamental Precepts** for Monks.
ii) Restraint through **Mindfulness**, which is guarding of the six sense doors.
iii) Restraint through **Wisdom**, which is guarding the mind by Insight Knowledge and using the four requisites by proper reflection of their functions.
iv) Restraint through **Patience** when faced with heat, cold, insects, or unpleasant conditions.
v) Restraint through **Energy** in avoiding wrong livelihood prohibited by the Code of Discipline.

2. Characteristic, Function, Manifestation and Proximate Cause of Morality

- Morality has the **characteristic** of **composing (*silana*)** one's physical & verbal actions by orientating them in the right direction. A person who observes the precepts watches closely over his physical and verbal actions so that they take place in an orderly manner under his control. In an immoral person, his physical and verbal actions take place in a haphazard manner without any control or direction. Morality also has the characteristic of **upholding** by serving as a basis or **foundation** for all acts of merit because no act of merit can be accomplished without it.

- The **function** of morality is twofold, namely: (i) **prevents** one from **misconduct** through body and speech, (ii) helps one to achieve the **quality of blamelessness** in virtuous persons.

- Morality is **manifested as purity** in bodily action, purity in verbal action and purity in mental action.

- The **proximate cause** of morality is **moral shame (*hiri*)** and **moral dread (*ottappa*)** of doing an immoral act. Although listening to the *Dhamma* promotes the arising of morality, it serves only as a remote cause. It is only through shame & dread that the precepts are observed. Without them, morality neither arises nor persists.

- Shame arises from **within** and dread arises from **without.** Suppose, for instance, there is an iron rod, one end of which is red-hot and the other end smeared with filth. The filthy end one would not touch owing to disgust, and the hot end out of fear. Shame is compared with the former and dread with the latter.

3. Morality for the Lay Disciple

For lay people, the basic morality one has to observe is the Five Precepts. The Five Precepts are **mandatory** because killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech and taking intoxicants are immoral and invariably lead to rebirth in the lower planes of existence. The morality group comprising Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood form a set of **Precepts of the Noble Eightfold Path** called ***Ajivatthamaka Sila***, which is abstaining from: killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, slandering, abusing, frivolous talk and wrong livelihood. These are the precepts to be fulfilled at the initial stage of the Noble Eightfold Path.

When the Buddha first appeared in the world, it was still enveloped in the darkness of greed, hate and delusion and the people were bereft of morality. In order to inculcate morality, He initially taught abstentions from wrong speech, wrong actions and wrong livelihood to best suit their coarse minds. Later on, when the grosser forms of evil had been removed from their habits, the Buddha no longer made use of it. Instead He taught the **Five Precepts** and **Eight Precepts** to further purify their minds.

4. Five Precepts and Precepts of the Noble Eightfold Path

At first sight, the Five Precepts appear to be inferior to the Precepts of the Noble Eightfold Path, which have four verbal restraints compared to only one restraint (from lying) in the Five Precepts. However, of the 4 types of wrong speech, lying is the most serious as it forms the basis of breach of all the verbal restraints. The Buddha taught that for one who commits falsehood, there is no misdeed which he is not liable to perpetuate while one who **abstains from lying**, **can easily observe Right Speech.** How could one who does not tell lies indulge in slandering, abusing and frivolous talks, especially since the Buddha had warned that habitual indulgence in them would lead to rebirth in the lower worlds.

What about the **absence of Right Livelihood** in the Five Precepts? The answer to this lies in the fact that for one who observes the Five Precepts, no special effort is required to refrain from wrong livelihood which means earning one's living by the wrong means of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, etc. By observing the Five Precepts meticulously, one **automatically avoids these misdeeds**, let alone makes a living from them! Therefore **no question arises** that the Five Precepts are inferior to the Precepts of the Noble Eightfold Path.

In other words, observance of the Precepts of the Noble Eightfold Path is necessary for those who are still poor in morality in order to rid them of their debased habits. For the virtuous lay disciple who is well established in the **Three Refuges** and **Five Precepts** there is no special need for them to observe the Precepts of the Noble Eightfold Path. The analogy is similar to the case of a **fierce animal**, which has to be tied up or put in a cage to prevent it from causing harm while a **tame animal** is allowed to roam freely.

5. Eight Precepts

The Eight Precepts are called ***Atthanga Uposatha Sila*** (*Atthanga* means eight) because they are usually observed by the laity on special days called ***Uposatha,*** translated simply as "**Day of Fasting or Abstinence**."

Nowadays, the lay people observe 4 *Uposatha* days in each month, namely: **new moon, 8th waxing, full moon,** and **8th waning days**. In Buddhist countries, virtuous lay disciples take the opportunity where possible, to observe Eight Precepts, visit the monastery to perform *dana,* listen to *Dhamma* talks and engage in meditation on an *Uposatha* Day. The Eight Precepts are:

- Abstention from [1]killing; [2]stealing; [3]telling lies; and [4]taking intoxicants. These four precepts are **mandatory abstentions** called ***Varitta Sila.***

- Abstention from [5]all sexual activity; [6]taking food after mid-day; [7]dancing, singing, music, unseemly shows & the use of garlands, perfumes, cosmetics and jewelry that aim to beautify and adorn the person; [8]high and luxurious seats and beds.

The first category is called ***Varitta Sila*** or **Morality of Abstention** because their actions invariably lead to rebirth in the lower worlds. However the second category of actions may, or may not, lead to rebirth in the lower worlds depending whether they are done with mind **accompanied or unaccompanied by wrong view.** Lay Noble disciples (*Ariyas*) such as Visakha and Anathapindika, who have not eradicated sensual craving, enjoy lawful sexual relations with their spouses, eat after mid-day, dance, sing, enjoy music, beautify themselves and sleep in luxurious beds. But since they do so with mind **unaccompanied by wrong views**, their actions will not result in rebirth in the lower worlds.

The *Ariya's* attitude towards sensual pleasures differs from that of the ordinary worldling. The Scriptures compare it to that of a clean Brahmin who, pursued by a mad elephant, seeks refuge with loathing and reluctance in a pile of excreta. When oppressed by sensual craving, the lay *Ariya* who has not eradicated this defilement, deals with the sense object with mind free from wrong view. On the contrary, the ordinary worldling indulges in sensual pleasures generally with mind accompanied by wrong view.

When a person who has taken refuge in the Triple Gem observes the Five Precepts, he would be a **virtuous lay disciple** of the Buddha. If he makes further effort to observe the Eight Precepts, it is for the purpose of practising the holy life at a higher level. In this sense, the second category of four additional precepts, are **voluntary** and are considered as ***Caritta Sila*** or **Morality of Performance.** For monks and novices, the Buddha had strictly forbidden them to indulge in such acts and their **mandatory avoidance** constitutes ***Varitta Sila.***

6. Ten Precepts

The Ten Precepts is an extension of the Eight Precepts whereby the **single precept** of abstaining from dancing, singing, music, unseemly shows & the use of garlands, perfumes, cosmetics and jewelry is split into **two precepts**, namely:

- Abstaining from dancing, singing, music, unseemly shows
- Abstaining from the use of garlands, perfumes, cosmetics, jewelry

These make nine precepts and another precept of abstaining from receiving gold and silver (***Jatarupa rajata patiggahana***) makes it ten. According to the ***Khuddakapatha Commentary***: "Silver is a *kahapana* (coin), or it can be a metal *masaka* (penny), or a wooden *masaka*, or a clay *masaka,* and so on, of any kind as employed in **commerce** anywhere". In modern context, this includes **money**. The Ten Precepts are mandatory for monks and novices but not for lay disciples where their observance constitutes ***Caritta Sila*****, Morality of Performance.**

7. Grades and Types of Morality

Like all meritorious actions, the grade of morality is determined by the intensities of the four factors of Potency (*Iddhipadas*), namely: **desire, effort, mind or will and investigative knowledge**. When these elements are weak, medium or strong, the corresponding morality is **Inferior, Medium or Superior** respectively. Morality practised out of a desire for fame is of Inferior grade. That practised out of a desire for the fruits of merit is of Medium grade. That undertaken for the noble state, through understanding that one should cultivate these practices with pure wholesome volition solely for their nobleness, is Superior morality.

Between the two types of morality, **Morality of Performance (*Caritta Sila*)** can be accomplished only when one is endowed with faith and effort. Faith is the belief in the Law of Kamma i.e. good results will follow the good actions of practising morality. Effort means the relentless energy one applies to the practice of morality in keeping with the faith, namely: Right Effort. For **Morality of Avoidance** (***Varitta Sila***), faith alone is adequate to refrain from doing the demeritorious actions prohibited by the Buddha.

The morality observed by the laity is called ***Gahattha Sila*** or the **Householder's Morality**. With regard to this, the ***Visuddhi Magga*** or Path of Purification says:

'*The Five Precepts as a permanent undertaking, the Ten Precepts where possible and the Eight Precepts on an Uposatha Day, are the morality to be observed by the lay disciple*'.

8. Benefits of Morality

By abstaining from immoral speech, actions and livelihood, one achieves the quality of blamelessness with **non-remorse** as the benefit. One who observes the precepts is dear and loved by his companions in the life of purity who hold him in high esteem. Non-remorse leads to joy (*piti*) and bliss (*sukha*), followed by tranquillity (*passadhi*), the proximate cause of concentration (*samadhi*). With concentrated mind, one is able to penetrate into the true nature of things (*yathabhuta-nana*) through Insight (*vipassana*) and attain the Path & Fruition Knowledge (*magga-phala nana*). Thus morality has many benefits, beginning with non-remorse and ending with the realization of *Nibbana.*

The Buddha also mentioned the following **5 benefits** gained by one who observes the precepts and is established in morality.

i) Acquires a **large fortune** as a result of diligence.
ii) Acquires a **good reputation** and fame.

iii) Able to approach and enter any assembly of nobles, brahmins, householders or recluses with **complete self-assurance**, without fear or hesitation.
iv) Lives the **full life-span** and **dies unconfused** without fear or remorse.
v) After death, one is **reborn in the happy realms** of the human or celestial worlds.

9. Reverence (*Apacayana*)

According to the definition of *Sila*, **reverence (*apacayana*)** falls under the Morality of Performance. The *Atthasalini* defines reverence or respect thus:

'*Respect as a basis of meritorious action should be known in such acts as going to meet an elderly person, taking his bowl and robe for him, saluting him, showing him the way*'.

This explanation implies a humble attitude of mind that is **free of conceit**, accompanied by intimation through **act and speech of respect** for elders. This means that one should hold them in veneration in our thoughts, address them reverentially, use polite speech, bow to them, rise in their presence and offer one's seat, serve them first and generally treat them with the **greatest respect**.

In *Samyutta* I, 177, the Buddha elaborated further on this virtue when He subdued the pride of a brahmin named Pridestiff in Savatthi. This young man showed neither respect to his mother, nor to his father, nor to his teacher, nor to his eldest brother, which was probably the reason why he got this name. Once when the Buddha was preaching to a large congregation, Pridestiff was entertaining conceited thoughts about himself. At that moment, the Buddha read his thoughts and addressed him in verse, showing Pridestiff that his mind was like an open book.

Thereupon Pridestiff was humbled, and to the astonishment of the crowd, prostrated himself before the Buddha. After the Buddha had asked him to return to his seat, Pridestiff asked these questions:

"*To whom should one show humility? Whom treat with reverence? Whom should one offer honour and respect? To worship whom is well?*"

To which the Buddha replied:

"*To **mother** and to **father** one should show* humility; to ***eldest brother*** *and fourthly to your* ***teacher.*** *These, one should show reverence. These, one should show honour and respect. To worship them is well. The* ***Arahants****, stainless, cool, having done what is to be done, Those peerless ones who are docile, immune and sane. Subdue your pride and hold them in veneration.*"

a) **Reverence among Lay People**

Among the laity, **parents come first** because they bring their children into the world and raise them with care and affection, always desiring their welfare and success. In *Anguttara* i, 62, the Buddha said that even if one should carry his mother on one shoulder and his father on the other shoulder for a hundred years serving them dutifully, one could never repay them. But if one could incite one's parents to **practise generosity** and **morality** and establish them in **faith in the Triple Gem** and **wisdom**, one does repay what is due to one's parents. Among the Ten Subjects of Right View, understanding that there are results of one's actions (*kamma*) towards one's mother and father constitutes Right View. Therefore, one should always hold them in veneration in one's thoughts, speech and action.

Older brothers, sisters and relatives deserve our respect because they were the ones who protected and helped us when our parents were busy. Our **teachers** also deserve our respect because they taught us how to read & write and educated us in the arts & sciences

so that we are not illiterate. In the East, respect for an older person is considered a sign of proper upbringing. By being respectful to elders, one gains much benefit because they will provide the best advice based on their experiences, which they will not share with a disrespectful person. For one behaving dutifully and respecting the elders, four things increase: **lifespan, beauty, comfort and strength.**

For Buddhists, the **highest veneration** goes to the Triple Gem, that supreme resort consisting of the **Buddha, *Dhamma*** and ***Sangha*** because they are the most worthy objects of veneration (see Going for Refuge). For this reason, members of the *Sangha* are held in veneration by virtuous lay disciples, who reverentially salute and prostrate themselves when they meet a monk, serving him with care and respect. Through such acts of reverence, the lay disciple benefits by casting away pride and conceit. The monk is also happy to preach the *Dhamma* to such people who are considered as **proper resort** (***gocara***).

b) **Reverence among Members of the *Sangha***

When someone becomes a monk, he leaves the home life and becomes a homeless one. His **preceptor**, who now 'raises' him in the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* (Teaching and Discipline) is considered as the **father** while the pupil is considered as the son. The pupil has to observe a strict, mandatory code of conduct towards the preceptor, performing acts of **reverence and service** as stipulated in the *Vinaya*, failure of which can constitute ***dukkata*** or minor offences.

There is also a code of conduct regulating the behavior of a junior monk towards his seniors e.g. a junior monk must address a senior monk as '***Bhante*** or **Venerable Sir**' but the senior addresses the junior as '***Avuso or*** **Friend**'. Thus a monk is required to remember the date and time of his ordination so that he would know his status when meeting another monk and behave accordingly.

Similarly, **novices** are required to **act reverentially** to any monk they meet even though the latter is newly ordained. In this way, the harmony of the *Sangha* is preserved. Incidentally, no monk is allowed to ordain new monks i.e. act as preceptor unless he has undergone 10 years rains-retreat (*vassa*) and is well-versed in the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya*. In Myanmar, a monk of 10 years standing or above is addressed as '**Sayadaw**'.

10. Humble or Dutiful Service (*Veyyavacca*)

Childers' Pali Dictionary translates '***veyyacacca***' as service or duty performed by an inferior to a superior. This implies a **humble attitude** of mind free from conceit, when performing an act of service to another party. The Atthasalini defines it thus:

"*Dutifulness as basis of meritorious action should be known in those acts by which we carry out duties great and small towards our elders, when, for instance, we take the bowl from a bhikkhu who has been seen to enter the village for alms and fill it with food in the village, and present it to him, or go quickly and take the bowl, etc., on hearing the summons,* '*Go and bring the bhikkhu's bowl*'."

a) **Humble Service among Lay People**

For lay people, service means serving one's parents and elders dutifully and carrying out the job to their satisfaction. Other types of humble service include ministering to the sick and unfortunate in old folks and welfare homes, by attending patiently to their needs. Humble service of nursing the sick is highly praised by the Buddha. All types of **humble deeds** to the community, temples, such as performing humble services of helping to keep the monastery clean, cooking, serving food and drinks, washing dishes, etc., also constitute ***veyyavacca*** in addition to those defined above. The fruits

of humble service are obtaining **help in time** of need, **accomplishment** of one's wishes and having a **retinue.**

b) **Dutifulness among Monks**

For monks, there are certain duties to be performed towards one's preceptor or teacher, such as: attend to his needs, wash his alms-bowl, take care of his robes, offer him a drink during a meal, prepare his bath, keep his room clean, etc. In return, the preceptor is required to train the disciple in the Teaching and Discipline and provide him with the necessaries such as an alms-bowl, robes and other articles, which the pupil does not possess. If the pupil is sick, the preceptor is required to nurse him until he recovers. Such duties are mandatory for monks, unless exemption is granted by the preceptor e.g. as in the case of a pupil who wishes to practise intensive meditation.

11. References

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